

A Father Who Buried His Son Reflects on Miracles, Suffering and the Value of One Life

When I speak about God's goodness online, sometimes I hear about how naïve I am. It's easy to be a Christian when everything always goes right, they say to inform me about the "real world." You wouldn't talk so big about God if you had to watch children suffer.

My answer to that is simple—you're right. I haven't watched children suffer. I watched a single child suffer: my child. He was born with Trisomy 13 and passed away when he was only 2 months old.

Joshua would have been 18 years old this year. An adult—the end of his childhood and the first steps of his manhood. I find myself wondering what colleges he would have been looking at, or if he would be planning for college at all. I wonder what hobbies he would have ended up pursuing—surely music, considering how he loved songs in his short life. I've also been thinking about what I learned from him and what I would say to him now, if I could.

I watched the birth defects, the corruption in his own cells and the rapacity of chance, tear his little body apart. I watched him struggle to breathe every time he inhaled. I (or Jill) held him constantly, because if we didn't constantly monitor his breathing, he would just stop. We had to massage his back every few minutes or he would stop breathing. He was almost never out of our arms, and the few times he was, we were right there, just in case.

When Joshua clenched his tiny hands together, it was so tight

because of muscle spasms that we had to pry them apart to try to give him a bath. I watched him as we had to stick a tube down his throat multiple times a day just to make sure he had food, because his mouth was so malformed he couldn't use a bottle.

I watched him lying in the hospital when he was born—his skin and lips all blue, fighting for each heartbeat. I remember the surprise I felt that he hadn't been healed, despite all my praying and all the praying friends we have. I had thought for sure he would be healed, and we'd have this great miracle story to tell. Instead I saw the look in the doctors' and nurses' eyes when they put him on Jill's chest, just waiting for the few minutes of life they thought he had.

I can still feel the weight of the oxygen tank in the diaper bag that we always carried, because he couldn't get enough air on his own. I remember holding him as he fussed in the night—being careful to not turn too many circles in one direction as I paced, because the long tube that connected to our at-home oxygen system might get tangled and pull the tube out of his nose.

A month later, I watched him lying on a hospital table crying—silently, as he usually did, since he wasn't able to scream; he just cried wordlessly with his mouth open and face turning blue. Because of two hernias pulsing out of his little body, Joshua was in so much pain that he quit breathing and the nurse thought he was gone. And I remember almost wishing that he was, so he wouldn't suffer any more. But he didn't. His heart started beating, he started breathing and his pain went on.

Then, only two months in to Joshua's life, the pediatrician squeezed his swollen feet and stomach and said that his heart had begun to fail. Jill and I sat on our bed in our little apartment, watching his life ebb away: his breathing got slower and slower, until he was gone.

I remember thinking how silly it is on TV shows and movies when people can't tell if someone is dead or not; I knew the instant he was gone that his spark of life was gone, and only his broken shell remained. I remember carrying him to the funeral home. Somehow the sun came up and everyone in town went about their business, as if nothing had changed.

I don't trust God because life is always good or easy or simple. I know life sucks. I know it more than just a passing witty comment or a quick meme—I know it deep down in the broken parts of my heart and soul.

Everything is corrupted, even the most innocent and beautiful things. I know that the things that should bring joy often bring pain, and the pain is sometimes more than you think you can take. I know the feeling of everything falling apart, and wanting to curl up in ball, or punch something, or run, or never get out of bed, all at the same time.

This world is broken. I know it—not because I read it in a theology book or heard it in Sunday school. I know it because my world is broken.

And I choose to trust God anyway. I felt His peace when we had Joshua, when Jill and I were up for days on end, too exhausted to even talk to each other. I knew God was there at his funeral, and I knew he was in God's arms when we put his tiny casket in the ground.

I know God because of the pain in life. Joshy taught me that following Christ is not potlucks and dress pants and new pews. Following Christ is sobbing in the night for some sort of strength when I'm so tired I can't even think straight; it's reading page after page after page in the Bible, searching for some verse that will speak something or explain why; it's praying and listening and praying again and feeling like there's no answer—and wondering if maybe, just maybe, the reason I don't hear from Him is my fault. Did I do something

to make God angry? I apologize just in case.

In the book of Daniel, the three guys who refused to bow to the king are being interrogated, and they say one of my favorite lines in the Bible: "We know, O King, that our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace. But even if He does not, let it be known that we will never worship the image you have set up" (Dan. 3:16-18, paraphrased).

We don't serve God because He answers our prayers, though sometimes He does. We don't serve because He blesses us with good gifts, though He often does. We don't serve because of the wonders and miracles He can do, though they're great stories when He does. We don't serve because He does what we want, because He is not at our command. We are at His.

We serve because He is God; He reigns over the entire cosmos. He can summon the might of the hurricane, and yet care for the smallest life on Earth. He causes the rise and fall of nations by His will, and His will alone. We serve because He is awesome, and there is none beside Him. Ever.

I know that God can heal—and sometimes He does, miraculously and dramatically. Sometimes He heals over time, gradually. Sometimes He doesn't—and I don't know why. When students ask me why God does or doesn't do certain things, the answer is "I don't know." I know God can answer prayer, and so we pray; but sometimes He doesn't. Sometimes He seems silent, invisible, absent.

But sometimes He's there. Sometimes He does answer—almost never the way we expect, but when we look back, we can see God's words written across our lives. And in Joshua's life, I know that God spoke to me; not the way I prayed, or the way I wanted, or thought I wanted.

He didn't speak in the thunder, or the wind, or the miracle, or the doctor's office. He spoke to me in the exhaustion, and the funeral, and the drive to the cemetery, and the burial,

and the pain, and the slow recovery, and the knowledge that things will never be as they should be.

He spoke to me and said, "I buried My Son too. I know your pain. But death could not hold Him. Death cannot hold any of My children." God reminded me of the one thing that He always offers: hope.

I know God could have healed Josh; He didn't. But let it be known—I will trust Him anyway. {eoa}

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